

2006 YEAR BOOK AUSTRALIA LAUNCH

20 JANUARY 2006

I am honoured to be invited back to officially launch the 2006 *Year Book Australia*. Last year I was proud to launch the *Year Book* in the Bureau's centenary year, and what a wonderful year of celebrations it's been.

Your centenary highlighted the fact that official statistics are an essential tool for the sensible planning of Australia's future. Over the last 100 years the ABS has provided reliable, trustworthy and relevant statistics to enable governments and the community to make informed decisions about future needs.

The *Year Book* is the flagship of ABS publications and is undoubtedly the principal reference work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Not only is it found on many bookshelves in the Federal Parliament but more importantly it's in constant use as the most authoritative resource of facts about Australia ; its people and economy.

Using a pun with this year's special topic of Australia's deserts, others may be forgiven for thinking the *Year Book* is a dry reference work. Not so. By its very nature the *Year Book* is also an important historical publication and it's full of fascinating details explaining how and why changes in our way of life have developed.

I recommend the *Year Book* as essential reading for anyone who is remotely interested in all things Australian. You'll be amazed at the range of information contained in its 776 pages.

It's become traditional for each edition to have feature articles based on themes. This year, of course, the theme is deserts, recognising that it is the International Year of the Desert, and Dr Mike Smith has given us a fascinating insight into the make up of deserts.

Now, while Australia may appear to be something of a remote and largely desert region to many people around the world we can take great pride in how we compare with other nations.

Our population has continued to grow by 1.2% over the past year. This growth rate is double that of the world's most populous country, China, and higher than that of Canada, the USA, Hong Kong, the UK, Japan and Germany.

Our life expectancy also compares well with other developed nations. Today, most babies born in Australia on average can expect to live longer than babies in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America.

Currently, boys born in Australia have a life expectancy of 78 years compared to 55 years 100 years ago. This is exceeded by Hong Kong and Iceland but only by one more year. Australian baby girls can expect to live to 83 years, 24 years better than the early 1900s. Only Hong Kong and Japan have better figures.

Another of the fascinating details in the *Year Book* refers to marriage. It's interesting to discover that Australians are staying in registered marriages longer before separating or getting a divorce. The median duration of marriage prior to divorce is 12.2 years, up from 10.7 years a decade ago.

Australians are also getting married later in life, with the median age at first marriage reaching 29 years for men and 27 for women. A decade ago Australian men and women were 2 years younger when they were marrying for the first time. Accordingly, women are waiting longer to have their first child. These are all fascinating details of how life in Australia is changing.

Picking up on today's theme of Australian deserts and combining geographic information from the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre with 2001 Census data – it appears the population of Knox which forms a large part of the Aston electorate in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, at around 169,000 people, is slightly less than the entire population living in arid areas across a vast amount of Central Australia.

But who lives in these harsh regions? About one quarter of people living in the desert region, especially in the more remote areas, are Indigenous people. The mining industry accounts for bringing in many of the non-Indigenous people, and is the largest employer. The age distribution also reflects the employment focus with most of the population of prime working age, between 25 and 44 years.

Perhaps as compensation for the harsh conditions, people working in the mining industry in these regions received higher incomes – their median individual weekly income of \$1,311 is significantly more than the Australian median of \$590.

One of the best known activities of the ABS is the Census, carried out every five years. The next Census will take place on the 8th of August this year and the ABS will be going to great lengths to ensure that everyone in Australia is counted on census night, particularly in our remote desert regions.

About 30,000 Census collectors will use a wide range of transport including helicopters, light aircraft, and four-wheel drives to traverse Australia's remotest areas to ensure that no one misses out on the nation's biggest stock take.

A major development for this Census will be the option for people to complete the forms on-line. This in itself has produced its own challenges for the Bureau and a great deal of work has gone into planning and producing the system.

However just as the Census faces challenges in reaching every Australian, our nation also has challenges to meet in its future.

Australia's population is ageing because of sustained low fertility, although there have been signs of increases over the last few years, and increased life expectancy. This has resulted in there being proportionally fewer children in the population and more older people.

In the future, population ageing is expected to have an effect on the size of the Australian labour force, and the financial commitment of the Australian economy to support the aged. At the moment almost one in three Australians are older than 50 years but it's expected that by 2051 almost half of all Australians will be older than 50.

South Australia could be the first to feel the effects as it has the oldest population mix of all the states and territories. Half of the state's population is older than 38.5 years, which is the highest median age of all states and territories.

Tasmania's population is close behind with a median age of 38.4 years. However Tasmania's population has also experienced the largest increase in median age with an increase of more than eight years over the last two decades.

Population growth will be another challenge in our future. While our population is currently growing, latest projections indicate that this may not necessarily continue. Depending on demographic trends, Australia's population could peak around the middle of the century and then gradually decline.

All the details I've just referred to were found in just one chapter in the 2006 *Year Book*. There are 29 more chapters packed with fascinating information.

For instance, our use of the Internet is booming. International tourism continues to increase and our domestic airports are busier than ever. All this is vital information for our planners and the Bureau makes it available in the *Year Book*.

This is the real value of the *Year Book*. It paints a big picture overview of the way we live in Australia. No wonder it's become the major reference work found in use around the nation. If you could only have one reference book about Australia, I highly recommend you choose *Year Book Australia*.

It now gives me great pleasure to officially launch *Year Book Australia 2006*.